MODERN AMERICAN WRITERS

III. THEODORE DREISER

MODERN AMERICAN WRITERS

Edited by ERNEST BOYD

I. JAMES BRANCH CABELL
By CARL VAN DOREN

II. EDITH WHARTON
By ROBERT MORSS LOVETT

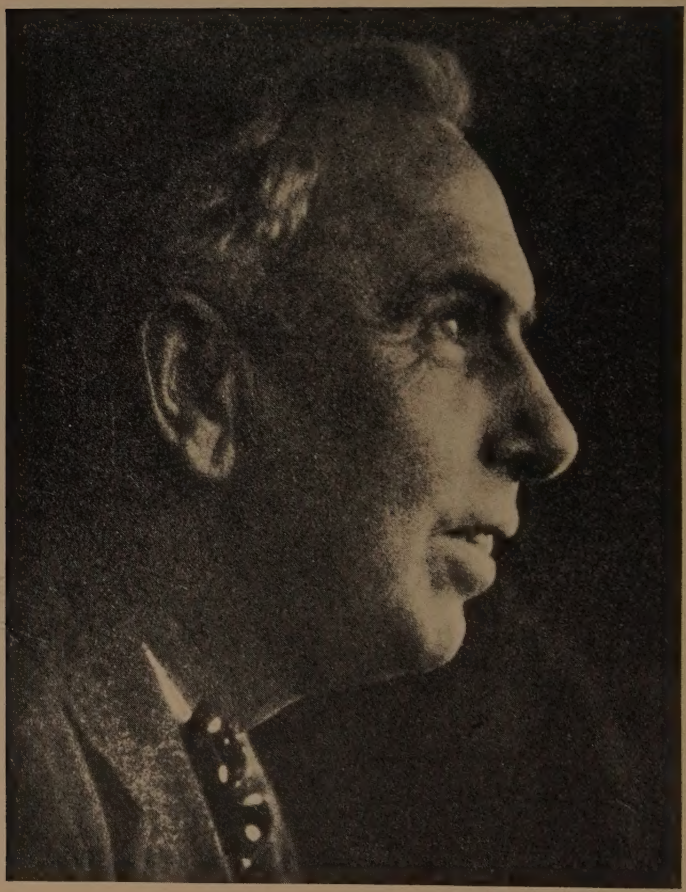
III. THEODORE DREISER
By BURTON RASCOE

In Preparation

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON
By BEN RAY REDMAN

H. L. MENCKEN
By ERNEST BOYD

and others.



Theodore Dreiser

THEODORE DREISER

By
BURTON RASCOE

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY
NEW YORK :: :: :: :: :: :: 1926

TEXAS EASTERN UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

COPYRIGHT, 1925, BY
ROBERT M. MCBRIDE & CO.

Printed in the United States of America

Published 1925

Second Edition, November, 1926

THEODORE DREISER

CRITICAL: HIS PLACE

ABOUT ten years before Theodore Dreiser was born—that is to say, roughly, about 1860—the whole economic and cultural aspect of the United States underwent a profound revolution. Not since the sinking of the Spanish Armada released new energies and stimulated national expansion under the reign of Elizabeth in England, had any country experienced so vast a transformation as that which came about by the realization of the possibilities of cheap transportation by rail and rapid communication between producing and distributing centers by telegraph. Let me quote from the most succinct and authoritative survey of America's industrial growth that has yet been written, Garret Garrett's article on "Business" in *Civilization in the United States:*

"On the map of 1850 the railroads resemble earthworms afraid to leave water and go

inland. The notion of a railroad was that it supplemented water transportation, connecting lake, canal, and river routes, helping traffic over the high places.

"But in the next ten years—1850 to 1860—destiny surrendered. There was that rare coincidence of seed, weather, deep ploughing, and mysterious sanction which the miracle required. The essential power of the American was suddenly liberated. There was the discovery of gold in California. There was the Crimean War, which created a high demand abroad for our commodities. The telegraph put its indignities upon time and space. The idea of a railroad as a tool of empire seized the imagination. Railroads were deliriously constructed. The map of 1860 shows a glistening steel web from the seaboard to the Mississippi.

"The gigantesque was enthroned as the national fetich. Votive offerings were mass, velocity, quantity. True cities began. The spirit of Chicago was born. Bigness and be-damnedness. In this decade the outlines of our economic development were cast for good.

"In the exclusive perspective of business the Civil War is an indistinct episode. It

stimulated industry in the North, shattered it in the South. The net result in a purely economic sense is a matter of free opinion. The Morse telegraph code probably created more wealth than the war directly destroyed. Or the bitter sectional row over the route of the first transcontinental railroad which postponed that project for ten years possibly cost the country more than the struggle to preserve the Union. But that is all forgotten.

"After 1860 the momentum of growth, notwithstanding the war and two terrible panics, was cumulative. In the next fifty years, down to 1910, we built half as much railroad mileage as all the rest of the world. Population trebled. . . .

"Of what happened at the same time to capital, in which term we include also credit, there could have been no prescience at all. Even now when we think of building a railroad, a telephone system, or an automobile factory, the thought is that it will take capital, as of course it will at first, but one should consider also how anything that increases the velocity with which goods are exchanged, or reduces the time in which a given amount of business may be transacted, adds to the func-

tioning power of capital. To illustrate this: The merchant of 1850 did business very largely with his own capital unaided. He was obliged to invest heavily in merchandise stocks. The turn-over was slow. His margin of profit necessarily had to be large. But with the development of transportation and means of communication—the railroad, telegraph, and telephone—and with the parallel growth of banking facilities, the conditions of doing business were fundamentally changed. All the time-factors were foreshortened.

"A merchant now has to lock up much less capital in merchandise, since his stocks are easily and swiftly replenished. The turnover is much faster because people using suburban railways and street-cars go oftener to shop. And not only is it possible for these reasons to do a larger volume of business with a given amount of capital, but the merchant now borrows two-thirds, maybe three-quarters, of his capital at the bank in the form of credit. The same is true of the manufacturer. . . .

"The effect of this revolution of methods upon the morals and manners of business was tremendous. It destroyed the aristocracy of

business by throwing the field open to men without capital."

In the same article, Mr. Garrett offers these reflections:

"Modern business derives from three passions in this order, namely: The passion for things, the passion for personal grandeur, and the passion for power. Things are multiplied in use and possession when people exchange with each other the products of specialized labor. Personal grandeur may be realized in wealth. Gratification of the third passion in this way is new. Only in recent times has business become a means to great power, a kind of substitute for kingship, wherein man may sate his love of conquest, practise private vengeance, and gain dominion over people.

"These passions are feeble on the Oriental side of the world, strong in parts of Europe, powerful in America. Hence the character of American business. It is unique, wherein it is so, not in principle but in degree of phenomena. For natural reasons the large objects of business are most attainable in this country. Yet this is not the essential difference. In the pursuit of them there is a characteristic American manner, as to which

one may not unreasonably prefer a romantic explanation. No white man lives on this continent who has not himself or in his ancestry the will that makes desire overt and dynamic, the solitary strength to push his dreams across the seas. Islands had been peopled before by this kind of selection, notably England; never a continent. A reckless, egoistic, experimental spirit governs, betrays, and preserves us still.

"The elemental hunger for food, warmth, and refuge gives no direct motive to business. People may live and reproduce without business. Civilization of a sort may exist without its offices. The settler who disappears into the wilderness with a wife, a gun, a few tools, and some pairs of domestic beasts, may create him an idyllic habitation, amid orchards and fields, self-contained in rude plenty; but he is lost to business until he produces a money crop, that is, a surplus of the fruits of husbandry to exchange for fancy hardware, tea, window glass, muslin, china, and luxuries. . . . Business morality is a term without meaning. There is no such thing. Business is neither moral nor immoral. It represents man's acquisitive instinct acting outside of humanistic motives.

Morals are personal and social. Business is impersonal and unsocial."

I quote Mr. Garrett thus at length because the truths he has here enunciated and the facts he has here set down, are the very truths and the very facts which critics have challenged when they find them mirrored in Mr. Dreiser's epic novels of American business. Nurtured upon the work of sheltered novelists like William Dean Howells (to name the most considerable of the American realists of an earlier period), who continued to write novels of American life as though the social conditions which they sought to mirror had not already undergone a change which no longer made them true, these critics failed utterly to perceive the tremendous significance of even the mere documentary evidence in Mr. Dreiser's work. They failed to perceive that novels like *The Financier, The Titan, Sister Carrie,* and *Jennie Gerhardt* were faithful mirrors of the national soul during the development of the first phase of American industrialism.

Dreiser is a romantic naturalist who found an epic quality in the rise of individuals to merciless and remorseless power through the adaptation of their combative instincts to the

peculiar conditions of the American struggle for existence. To win out in the struggle precipitated by the conditions Mr. Garrett describes required (and requires) imagination and energy, an amenable and disciplined conscience, and a highly developed acquisitive instinct. It was Mr. Dreiser's depiction of the last named attribute that caused his critics to wince and to declare his picture false. Stuart P. Sherman cries aloud that Dreiser has falsified the evidence and says that in Dreiser's novels, "The male is characterized by cupidity, pugnacity, and a simian inclination for the other sex." Those characteristics are, precisely, what go to make up men like Frank Cowperwood, the hero of Mr. Dreiser's *The Financier* and *The Titan.*

The acquisitive instinct, as all psychologists know, is an instinct for self-aggrandizement by the number and value of possessions. It has, often enough, an erotic basis; and the possessor of a powerful acquisitive instinct is quite likely to have, in Mr. Sherman's words, "a simian inclination for the other sex." If that inclination is not sublimated into an acceptance of symbols of the primary object of desire, the acquisitive

male's amatory conquests do take on a simian aspect. And if Mr. Sherman has failed to observe this he has been pathetically blind to human behavior as it is manifested all around him.

With the development of industrial competition in the United States, ingenuity, trickery, and deception became the necessary factors of material success. Whereas men had formerly used their hands in wresting a living from the soil, men now used their heads to wrest a living from their neighbors. In the larger cities this often amounted to a deadly battle of nerves and wits, wherein the less callous perished in bankruptcy, poverty, and spiritual disintegration.

Even victory itself was seldom sweet. By using their minds exclusively and foregoing the creative thrill to be derived from tilling the soil, building shelter and fashioning beautiful and practical things, men established the dangerous habit of depending upon their minds for their play as much as for their means of earning a living and acquiring power. And their minds were not prepared for the emergency. Their faculties, frequently, were too much occupied with schemes of cheating for them to know how to use

them in their moments of leisure. With the acquisition of money and power, American men among the great captains of industry in the era immediately antecedent to our own frequently did not know what to do with them. The more sensible ones—sensible of their limitations—went ahead piling up more money because that was the only creative satisfaction they knew. Some others satisfied their vanity in a pathetic and spectacular philanthropy. Others employed experts to hoard up for them the procurable art treasures of Europe. And still others fulfilled thwarted and infantile desires in Neronian debauches.

Until Mr. Dreiser came along no one had had the wit to see the epical quality of this aspect of the drama of American life or the genius to translate it into terms of the novel. It is true that Stephen Crane, David Graham Phillips, H. B. Fuller, and Frank Norris made experiments in these dramatic materials, but none of them had the force, power, and vision of Mr. Dreiser; none had his vast prodding energy; none had his troubled sense of the human tragedy underlying this great play of forces, the very sense which gives his novels their depth and dignity.

And because Mr. Dreiser was the first to challenge serious attention by attempting to do for the American scene something comparable to what the French realists, such as Balzac, Zola, Flaubert and Maupassant had done for the French scene of the Nineteenth Century, the college professors who controlled critical opinion at the time of Dreiser's début, rushed at him crying "Liar!" and "Corruptor of youth!"

"He has just two things to tell us about Cowperwood," writes Stuart P. Sherman in *On Contemporary Literature,* "that he has a rapacious appetite for money; and that he has a rapacious appetite for women. In *The Financier* he 'documents' these truths about Cowperwood in seventy-two chapters, in each of which he shows us how his hero made money or how he captivated women in Philadelphia. Not satisfied with the demonstration, he returns to the same thesis in *The Titan* and shows us in sixty-two chapters how the same hero made money and captivated women in Chicago and New York."

Now, provided this were true of these two novels and they possessed no other merit, *The Financier* and *The Titan* would be the Bible and the handbook of a large portion of the

male population of the United States; for if the conscious desires of the normal American male may be reduced to two, they are unquestionably the desire to make money and the desire to captivate women. If any one doubts this, let him consider the enormous popularity of such periodicals as *The American Magazine, System, Forbes' Magazine,* and *The Saturday Evening Post,* on the one hand, and the enormous success of Hart, Shaffner & Marx, Cluett & Peabody, the manufacturers of Stacomb and Glostora, Listerine, and Forhan's for the Gums, on the other. Let him consider that in marketing Dr. Eliot's selection of a five-foot shelf of world's famous classics the appeal of the advertising is not made to the prospective buyer's sense of the needs of the inner life, the life of the spirit, but to his sense of the practical advantages of a liberal education even *in the conquest of women!* We are familiar with the illustrations which accompany the text of one of these advertisements. A young and attractive woman is listening enraptured to one young man, while another young man, frowning his discomfiture, looks on enviously at the other's victory. The secret of the fascination of the young man who has the

advantage, we are told, lies in the fifteen minutes a day he devotes to reading the classics! I turn at random through the pages of a popular magazine and I am confronted by huge advertisements in black type challenging my eye with these announcements: "I WILL PROVE TO YOU THAT YOU CAN MAKE $100 A WEEK!" "YOU TOO CAN EARN $200 A WEEK!" "I NEED 100 MEN WHO CAN EARN $500 A MONTH!" "ANOTHER $50 RAISE!" "HOW TO INCREASE YOUR SALARY!" and so on.

I am not trying to be facetious. Far from it. I merely wish to call attention to the naïve innocence of professorial critics like Mr. Sherman concerning the actual world and to show how incapable they are of rendering critical justice to a genius like Mr. Dreiser who has been so close to the life he describes. It may readily be admitted that college professors, so long as they remain college professors, (usually) evince no "rapacious appetite for money" and no "rapacious appetite for women"; but all men are not college professors. Neither are all men Frank Cowperwoods; but in *The Financier* and *The Titan,* Mr. Dreiser was concerned not with the depiction of a college professor, but a corporation-breaking, vote-corrupting, jury-

bribing, non-ethical, non-moral, buccaneer of American finance, a man as remote from a college professor in interests, tastes, activities and understanding as two persons can well be imagined to be.

Because Mr. Sherman is typical of the critics who, when they have been aware of Mr. Dreiser at all, have been morally shocked and outraged by his novels, I should like to give some instances of the false witness he has borne against Mr. Dreiser's character. In his essay on *The Barbaric Naturalism of Theodore Dreiser,* Mr. Sherman, while examining Mr. Dreiser's work, is so obsessed by sex (it is he who accuses Mr. Dreiser of this obsession; but an impartial reader who will read Mr. Dreiser's work and then examine Mr. Sherman's essay will discover that it is the other way around) that he cheapens and degrades even an exclusively moral discussion of Mr. Dreiser's art. He reminds me in this of the man who was stirred by nothing in Giorgione's Venus except the position of the left hand, and who drew conclusions as to Giorgione's intention which nothing in the picture warranted. I will show you just how close my analogy is. In an essay purporting to deal with Mr. Dreiser's work, he refers

just twice to one of Mr. Dreiser's finest novels, *Sister Carrie:*

"When Sister Carrie yields to the seductive drummer . . ." and "What, if anything, Carrie Meeber's typical American parents taught her about the conduct of life is suppressed; for we meet her in a train to Chicago, *on which she falls to the first drummer who accosts her.*"

Neither of these statements is true to the spirit of the novel, nor to the actual facts concerning the novel. Carrie Meeber, on a train to Chicago, replies crisply and suspiciously to a few questions addressed to her by a persistent and voluble drummer who is thick-skinned enough not to mind her rebuff and yet courteous and amiable enough not to cause her to seek the protection of the conductor against possible annoyance. Far from "falling to him," she does not see the drummer after she leaves the train at Chicago until she encounters him by chance on the street many weeks later. To be precise, Drouet is not heard of again until page 64. Meanwhile we are given a moving and convincing history of Carrie's pathetic attempts to find employment in Chicago, of the sort of work she was required to do when she finally

found a job, and an account of the life she lived with her married sister and her husband in a sordid tenement. Throughout these and subsequent chapters, far from Mr. Dreiser's suppressing "what her typical American parents taught her about the conduct of life," we are given both implicit and explicit information on this subject; we know that it *was* the typical moral training of the typical American family of the middle-class of that period; we know that it was very strict and full of the taboos that were deemed socially expedient. Carrie does not "fall to" Drouet (as Mr. Sherman elegantly expresses it) until the close of the *eighth* chapter and then only after a prolonged and ardent courtship on the part of Drouet, following a period of loneliness, a sense of hopelessness and failure on the part of Carrie.

I did not complete the first of the two quotations in which Mr. Sherman dismissed *Sister Carrie* because, whereas what I have shown is a misrepresentation by a doctoring of the facts, the conclusion of the first sentence is something that Mr. Sherman has made up entirely out of his head. It reads in full, "When Sister Carrie yields to the seductive drummer, Drouet, Mr. Dreiser ju-

dicially weighs the advantages and disadvantages of being a well-kept mistress." Now, I have read and re-read the chapters immediately following the one in which Carrie goes to live with Drouet, in a fruitless endeavor to discover something which Mr. Sherman might misconstrue as a weighing of "the advantages and disadvantages of being a well-kept mistress." For myself, I should have rather liked to hear either Carrie or Mr. Dreiser on the subject; nor do I think it would have been irrelevant. But there is simply nothing of the sort there. Carrie's conscience troubles her—and here Mr. Dreiser conveys this with great artistic subtlety, through action and dialogue—and she becomes morose, preöccupied, and insistent that their union be made legal by marriage.

Everything rings humanly true and natural in the whole affair. Drouet is superbly drawn; his character, his point of view, his very tone and accent are richly accounted for. One knows just how he will inevitably act when Hurstwood is introduced and the dramatic triangle is developed; one feels that his first jealous fling at Carrie, "After all I have done for you!" when he had not done the one thing that would have kept her—i.e.,

marry her—is wholly in keeping with a character already carefully indexed.

It will be noted that Mr. Sherman has not only evaded discussion of the main theme of the novel—the relations between Sister Carrie and Hurstwood and of Hurstwood's tragedy—and has merely centered his attention upon an introductory episode, an episode necessary to the full realization of Carrie's character and to the determination of how she will act in a given set of circumstances later on; but that he has completely falsified what little he does tell the reader about the book.

Again Mr. Sherman writes with heavy-handed sarcasm:

> "By similar devices" (i.e., "coloring the news" of which Mr. Sherman accuses Mr. Dreiser) "Mr. Dreiser drives home the great truth that man is essentially an animal impelled by temperament, instinct, physics, chemistry—anything you please that is irrational and uncontrollable. Sometimes he writes an 'editorial' paragraph in which the laws of human life are explained by reference to the behavior of certain protozoa or by references to a squid and a lobster fighting in an aquarium."

Here, as usual, it is Mr. Sherman who is "coloring the news," not Mr. Dreiser. It is

entirely beside the point that Mr. Dreiser would have the support of every biologist, physiologist, anthropologist, and indeed every school textbook on natural history, that "man is essentially an animal"; and that he would have the support of Bergson, that "man is impelled by temperament," of William James, that "man is impelled by instinct and habit," and of an eminent group of biologists and psychologists, that "man is impelled by" either physics or chemistry or both. The Behaviorists favor chemistry. But even if Mr. Sherman is in sole possession of the true knowledge of the nature of man and the forces which impel him, and everybody else is wrong, he has still falsified the evidence in regard to Mr. Dreiser. Here are the facts which the reader may judge for himself:

In the early chapters of *The Financier,* Mr. Dreiser is intent upon rounding out the characteristics of the boy who is later to grow up and become Frank Cowperwood, the financier. Young Cowperwood is described as a courageous and defiant youth, a good fighter, early interested in money, not at all interested in books, and perplexed with a meditative boy's wonder about the issues of life. Then one day he was looking at a

tank in front of a fish store where were kept some odd specimens of sea life:

"He saw once there a seahorse—just a queer little sea-animal that looked somewhat like a horse—and another time he saw an electric eel which Franklin's discovery had explained. One day he saw a jelly-fish put in, and then a squid, and then a lobster. The lobster and the squid came well along in his fish experiences; he was witness of a familiar tragedy in connection with these two, which stayed with him all his life, and cleared things up considerably intellectually. The squid, it appeared from the talk of the idle bystanders who were always loafing about this market, was considered the rightful prey of the lobster, and the latter had no other food offered him. The lobster lay at the bottom of the clear glass tank on the yellow sand, apparently seeing nothing—you could not tell in which way his beady, black buttons of eyes were looking—but apparently they were never off the body of the squid. The latter, pale and waxy in texture, looking very much like pork fat or jade, was moving about in torpedo fashion; but his movements were apparently never out of the eyes of his enemy, for by degrees small portions of his body began to disappear, snapped off by the relentless claws of his pursuer. The latter, as young Cowperwood was one day a witness, would leap like a catapult to where the squid was apparently idly dreaming, and the squid, very alert, would dart

away, shooting out at the same time a cloud of ink, behind which it would disappear. It was not always completely successful, however. Some small portions of its body or its tail were frequently left in the claws of the monster below. Days passed, and now, fascinated by the drama, young Cowperwood came daily. . . . He returned one night, and lo! to his grief and astonishment, his wish was granted. There was a little crowd around the tank. The lobster was in the corner. Before him was the squid cut in two and partially devoured. . . .

"It made a great impression on him. It answered in a rough way that riddle which had been annoying him so much in the past: How is life organized? Things lived on each other—that was it. Lobsters lived on squids and other things. What lived on lobsters? Men, of course! Sure, that was it! And what lived on men? he asked himself. Was it other men? Wild animals lived on men. And there were Indians and cannibals. And some men were killed by storms and accidents. He wasn't so sure about men living on men yet; but men did kill each other. How about wars and street fights and mobs? He had seen a mob once. It attacked the *Public Ledger* building as he was coming home from school. His father had explained what for, too. There was great excitement. It was about the slaves. That was it! Sure, men lived on men. Look at the slaves. They were men. That's what all this excitement was about these days. Men killing other men—negroes."

I submit that this is a legitimate and wholly relevant employment of the novelist's means of creating character. Mr. Dreiser is not, as Mr. Sherman asserts him to be, "writing an 'editorial' paragraph in which the laws of human life are explained by reference to the behavior . . . of a squid and a lobster fighting in an aquarium." He is accounting for the character of Cowperwood in a dignified and artistic way which any sensible person can understand, for we can all recall impressions and experiences in our childhood which have influenced our actions in later life.

I have analyzed Mr. Sherman's essay on Dreiser, or rather portions of it, to this extent largely because it is typical of the sort of misrepresentation Mr. Dreiser has had at the hands of the critics from the moment of his arrival on the literary scene. About no other novelist of major rank that I can recall have there arisen and persisted so many fallacies and misapprehensions. Even his champions sometimes fall into them, so great was the wave of misrepresentation that inundated him from the start. It has slipped into the general consciousness that Dreiser deals only with sex, that his style is crude, graceless, and heavy, and that his philosophy is puerile.

Mr. Sherman voices all these charges in his essay on Dreiser (the essay, by the way, on which he achieved his reputation); and others before and after him have repeated them.

Before I go any further, let me suggest that you read the first four sections of Jules Lemaître's essay on Zola alongside of Mr. Sherman's essay on Dr. Dreiser. You will have—at least I had—an intimation that in this essay Mr. Sherman is not concerned with Mr. Dreiser at all; that Mr. Dreiser is only Mr. Sherman's excuse for trying to write like Jules Lemaître on Emile Zola. Perhaps you will also wonder that Mr. Sherman did not carry what seems to be a literary exercise through to a similar conclusion. That is, perhaps you will wonder until you see that doing so would involve reading more than a few pages of Mr. Dreiser's work; it would involve quoting from a number of books in support of a general impression of each one as a whole; and it would arrive at an evaluation that is, on the whole, just and highly favorable. This last, Mr. Sherman could not abide, for had not H. L. Mencken already praised Mr. Dreiser?

Now, let me show you a small but significant example of the pernicious effect of these

misrepresentations. Mr. W. C. Brownell is a man of culture and integrity. He has his deficiences both as a critic and as a writer of prose, but he is not ordinarily a man who would either carelessly or wilfully misuse a word or misrepresent a writer. In "The Genius of Style," Mr. Brownell has alluded once, contemptuously, to Mr. Dreiser.

> " . . . all that Victorian survivals could justly say to their censors in extenuation of their own varieties of commonplace would be, 'Strike, but read me.' Perhaps, too, that would be an unreasonable request to make of writers who, doubtless in self-protection, read only each other—with the retributive result, however, of belittling Howells, say, while extolling Mr. Dreiser. Probably Mr. Dreiser provides more *thrills*."

If Mr. Brownell had read Mr. Dreiser, he might still have struck, but he would never have used the word *thrills* in describing him. You see, Mr. Sherman has made Mr. Brownell think it unnecessary for him to read Mr. Dreiser before passing judgment. When you ask why I say this, I must paraphrase Mr. Brownell's accusation to read, "To ask them (Mr. Sherman and Mr. Brownell) to read Dreiser perhaps would be

an unreasonable request to make of writers, who, doubtless in self-protection, read only each other—with the retributive result of belittling Mr. Dreiser, while extolling Shakespeare. One can't go wrong on Shakespeare." You see, Mr. Brownell is mentioned *four times* at length and with approval in Mr. Sherman's *On Contemporary Literature* (the book in which the essay on Mr. Dreiser appears); and Mr. Brownell repays him weight by weight, inch by inch, by mentioning Mr. Sherman *four times,* at length and with approval, in *The Genius of Style* (the book in which Mr. Brownell's contemptuous reference to Mr. Dreiser appears).

I should not insist that Mr. Brownell read a great deal of Mr. Dreiser; I should like for him to take up any one of five or six books and dip into it. Here is an example. I open *A Hoosier Holiday* at random. The passage that meets my eye, is neither one of Mr. Dreiser's best nor one of his worst; but it is characteristic. It gives as well as any the general tone of Mr. Dreiser's work, the prevailing quality of his prose, and the sentiment, intelligence, and character of the author as it emerges from behind his work:

"We Americans have home traditions or ideals, created as much by song and romance as anything else: *My Old Kentucky Home, Suwanee River.* Despite any willing on my part, this home seemed to fulfill the spirit of those songs. There was something so sadly romantic about it. The shade of the great trees moved across the lawn in stately and lengthening curves. A stream at the foot of the slope leading down from the west side of the house dimpled and whimpered in the sun. Birds sang, and there were golden bees about the flowers and wasps under the eaves of the house. Hammocks of barrel-staves, and others of better texture, were strung between the trees. In a nearby barn of quaint design were several good horses, and there were cows in the field adjoining. Ducks and geese solemnly padded to and fro between the house and the stream. The air was redolent of corn, wheat, clover, timothy, flowers.

"To me it seemed that all the spirit of rural America, its idealism, its dreams, the passion of a Brown, the courage and patience and sadness of a Lincoln, the dreams and courage of a Lee or a Jackson, were all here. The very soil smacked of American idealism and faith, a fixedness in sentimental and purely imaginative American tradition, in which I, alas! could not share. I was enraptured. Out of its charms and sentiments I might have composed an elegy or an epic, but I could not believe that it was more than a frail flower of romance. I had seen Pittsburgh. . . . I had seen Lithuanians and Hungarians in their 'courts' and

hovels. I had seen the girls of that city walking the streets at night. This profound faith in God, in goodness, in virtue and duty that I saw here in nowise squared with the craft, the cruelty, the brutality and the envy that I saw everywhere else."

To me this is beautiful. I should not want it tidied up with artificial graces, literary unction, Mr. Brownell's kittenish wit, or Mr. Sherman's oily periods. I see no sex thrills in it, no pornography. I see no immoralism, no destruction of standards. I see a point of view that is honestly arrived at, through sadness and experience. And I see nothing to quarrel with in the point of view. This passage may contain a *thrill,* but not in the cheap and flippant sense Mr. Brownell meant by that word.

HIS ACHIEVEMENT

MR. DREISER'S first published work was *Sister Carrie,* which was brought out in 1900 by Doubleday, Page & Company, on the advice of Frank Norris, then acting as publisher's reader, and against the better judgment of his editorial associates. Before censuring the fine and reputable house of Doubleday, Page & Company, for its action following publication of the novel, it is sensible to recall that, at the time, it was an exceedingly courageous, even a brazen thing to do, to publish it at all. Reputations were sacrificed and bankruptcy faced from boycott in those days through the moral obloquy that followed actions less courageous and less revolutionary. Hitherto no one had dared present, in such a fashion, such a story about American life. It was tacitly held, despite all evidences to the contrary, that, in America, all men were honest, industrious, altruistic, faithful to one love and true to the spirit of democracy; and that all women, potentially or in fact, were either wives or prostitutes and that the pros-

tituties were in a negligible minority soon to be redeemed to society if the good work should go on silently in literature and openly in the newspapers and America continued to advertise herself as the most moral nation on the face of the globe. When, in 1893, H. B. Fuller attempted timidly to record some of the less shocking truths about life in Chicago in a novel entitled *The Cliff-Dwellers* he was buried beneath an avalanche of abuse to the effect that "life is not like that." He emerged two years later with a book called *With the Procession,* and again was treated like a pariah, this time so effectively that he turned his talent to less noxious themes and did not write anything worth reading until twenty-three years later when he tried his luck again as a realist with *On the Stairs.* Meanwhile the method he had employed back in 1893 was, owing to the progress of civilization, so commonplace that *On the Stairs* fell noiselessly into oblivion with only a few kind words from reviewers here and there about the beauty of the style and the neatness of the workmanship. Emboldened by this change of attitude, Mr. Fuller published during the following year, 1919, a book so unorthodox in theme and treatment that the publishers to

whom he first submitted it turned it down and it was brought out by a man in Chicago who occasionally published things that interested him personally. The book was *Bertram Cope's Year,* a novel on the same theme as Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* ("Death in Venice") and André Gide's *Corydon.* It was beautifully done, with consummate delicacy and literary art; but, although it was widely reviewed, no one took exception to it. Indeed, no one paid any particular attention to it. Fuller's name had become merely a name and even that only to a few who were directly concerned with literature and the criticism of literature; and the novel was engulfed with public indifference—a novel so "immoral" from the orthodox conception of morality that, in comparison, *Sister Carrie* is a Sunday School lesson.

Doubleday, Page & Company, then, by publishing *Sister Carrie,* were flying in the face of that Providence which protects babies, blind men, and drunks, but certainly does not protect publishers against the wrath of librarians, booksellers, reviewers, and outraged customers. When the novel was off the press, the editorial head of the firm was seized by

terrifying apprehensions about the propriety of issuing such a book. They were legitimate enough and well-grounded. Frank Norris had himself just written a novel wherein he had attempted to tell the truth as he saw it about one aspect of American life, and he was a man of high artistic aims and principles. He had never met Mr. Dreiser and knew nothing about him, but he had recognized in *Sister Carrie* a book of almost epochal importance in American literature, and he told his employers so. What is more, with that divine, if misguided, faith men occasionally have that others will see the truth and proclaim it, he suggested that the publishers carry out their decision to lock the first edition up in the cellar, but give him a limited number of copies to send out to intelligent reviewers. The masterpiece, he told his employers, would be recognized by these "critics" and the way would be made by their enthusiastic reviews for the appropriate reception of the novel by the public as an authentic contribution to American literature. The publishers let him have his way. They awaited the verdict of the reviewers. When the verdict came in, in the form of volumi-

nous reviews wherein the reviewers had been stirred to more life and activity than they had shown for years, young Mr. Norris, if he had any illusions, any faith still left, must have been shorn of the last shred of them utterly. For the reviews were overwhelmingly denunciatory. Dreiser was a falsifier of life; Dreiser was an immoralist; Dreiser was the Devil's advocate; Dreiser was a calumniator of American womanhood; Dreiser was a pervert; Dreiser was this and that and everything that was vile, untruthful, and godless.

Doubleday, Page & Company, from a business point of view, were right in their judgment; young Mr. Norris was wrong. The books were kept in the storehouse and not distributed. Mr. Dreiser sought, ineffectually, to obtain redress through the courts, and the novel was finally taken over by Harper & Brothers. Meanwhile, Mr. Dreiser had become an ogre. People who had been unable to obtain *Sister Carrie* took the reviewers' word for it that it was a vile and corrupting book and so the Dreiser legend arose. It was kept alive for over twenty years by reviewers and by those college professors, who, although *Sister Carrie* and other novels were later procurable, did not find it necessary to

read Mr. Dreiser in order to warn the world against him.

And now, what was this horrendous piece of fiction which gave Mr. Dreiser the reputation of a moral leper? It is the story of a young woman who went to Chicago from a small town, had affairs of the heart with two men (one of them already married) without being married to either of them, and achieved a degree of success on the stage. The book defied the literary conventions of America of the time in that neither of the men with whom Carrie Meeber lived was painted as a villain out of stage melodrama and in that Carrie was not reformed in the end and set upon virtue's path, nor yet punished with poverty and disgrace for her sins. That is the story in its barest skeleton. Miss Willa Cather, some twenty years after the publication of *Sister Carrie,* could write stories like *The Song of the Lark, Coming, Aphrodite!* and *A Lost Lady,* all involving episodes less "proper" than those in *Sister Carrie,* without arousing the slightest moral indignation. But it will, or should be, remembered that *Sister Carrie* made a story like *A Lost Lady* possible and that it paved the way for the reception of whatever con-

temporary fiction has to offer that is realistic in intent and fundamentally sound and honest as a reflection of American life.

Discussed from the beginning as a moral issue and not on its artistic merits, *Sister Carrie* has hardly yet escaped the critical incubus that then settled upon it. Almost inevitably critics feel constrained to combat the charge of immorality and indecency that has been lodged against the book before they can enter upon a discussion of the soundness of the characterization, the power and insight of the narrative, and the natural beauty and distinction of the novel as a whole. The brisk, American "go-getter" is characterized to the life in Drouet years before Sinclair Lewis began his mordant analysis of the type. And Drouet is something more than a type; he is a human being, understood, created out of a deep knowledge of the forces that helped to make him what he was. The workings of Carrie's mind from the first disillusions of her contact with life through experience in Chicago are carefully and subtly indicated. First was the erosion of her spirited hopes under the atmosphere of defeat and poverty in her sister's home where she had gone to live, and the pain and sor-

row attendant upon her attempt to find work with which to support herself. Second was her mental conflict arising from the gradual realization that the man she had fallen in love with and had gone to live with had no desire to bind himself in marriage to her, and her tacit acceptance of a philosophy of life that was foreign to the religious and moralistic teachings she had been nurtured on. Before Hurstwood appeared she had been resigned to defeat, with the secret knowledge that when Drouet was through with her she would, in all probability, be left to grow old in loneliness and poverty. Hurstwood's interest in, and attraction for, her renewed her spirit and her confidence. At first this gave her the whip-hand over Drouet, and finally it also gave her the whip-hand over Hurstwood. In the battle of sex she had come out the winner because of the madness of Hurstwood's desire for her. The crumbling of the will and assurance of this aggressive and powerful man is one of the most profoundly conceived tragic narratives in our literature. And alongside of it runs the narrative of Carrie like the treble to the bass of a musical composition. The whole accidental nature of her dominance and the precarious quality of

her security are conveyed through action and dialogue with the skill and insight of a Balzac. In tone, rhythm, and language, Mr. Dreiser never falters throughout the novel. The theme never gets away from him; he never loses sight of reality; there is not a manufactured or meretricious episode in the book. Incidental characters, like Mrs. Hurstwood, the hall-maid in the house where Drouet and Carrie went to live, the foreman in the sweatshop where Carrie first worked, come into the narrative possessing their own individuality, live and breathe as human beings, portrayed with great economy and sureness of touch. In *Sister Carrie,* as in (to some degree) his other novels, Mr. Dreiser steps out of the character as creator into the rôle of commentator occasionally and philosophizes upon the turn of events he has related or is about to relate. But so did Balzac, Tolstoi, Zola, and even Flaubert before him. Did not the impersonal Flaubert, whose aim it was to remove all traces of his own personality from his narrative, comment to the extent of making his own attitude toward Emma Bovary inescapable when he wrote that Emma "found in adultery all the platitudes of marriage"?

Sister Carrie was begun while Mr. Dreiser was working on a newspaper in Cleveland. His closest friend at that time was Arthur T. Henry, who later turned his attention to the theater, became a press-agent and wrote several plays. They were both full of aspiration and energy and they talked long evenings about books, life and art. Then one day Mr. Henry said to Mr. Dreiser, "Why don't you write a novel?" Mr. Dreiser answered that he would write one if Mr. Henry would write one also. They both began work, Mr. Dreiser idly writing down a title on a sheet of paper as he sat before his typewriter. Mr. Henry completed his novel before Mr. Dreiser completed *Sister Carrie,* but it was worthless and he was among the first to recognize it. Mr. Dreiser had got to a point in the progress of his novel where he could not make it go on. Mr. Henry read what he had written, was enthusiastic about it, and encouraged him to continue; but Mr. Dreiser put the manuscript away for two years before he could finish it. When it was completed it ran to an unwieldy length, too long for one volume, two short for two. Mr. Henry cut 40,000 words out of it, and the manuscript was dispatched to Doubleday,

Page & Company, where it was read by Frank Norris, with the results I have already related.

The treatment accorded *Sister Carrie* would have turned a lesser man toward work more promising in the rewards of fame and money. But with that novel he had set his will to work on the dream of achievement which had long been stirring within him. In *A Book About Myself* we find the germ of this dream. While working as a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* he spent much of his leisure reading at the Alleghany Carnegie Library. One day he came upon the work of Balzac:

"A new and inviting door to life had suddenly been thrown open to me," [he writes concerning that experience,] "Here was one who saw, thought, felt. Here was one who had a tremendous and sensitive grasp of life, philosophic, tolerant, amused. At once I was personally identified with his Raphael, his Rastignac, his Bixiou, his Bianchon. With Raphael I entered the gaming-house in the Palais Royal, looked despairingly down into the waters of the Seine from the Pont Royal, turned from it to the shop of the dealer in antiques, was ignored by the perfect young lady before the shop of the print-seller, attended the Taillefer banquet, suffered horrors over the shrinking skin. The lady without a

heart was all too real. It was for me a literary revolution. Not only for the brilliant and incisive manner with which Balzac grasped life and invented themes whereby to present it, but for the fact that the types he handled with most enthusiasm and skill —the brooding, seeking, ambitious beginner in life's social, political, artistic and commercial affairs (Rastignac, Raphael, de Rubempré, Bianchon)— were, I thought, so much like myself. Indeed, later taking up and consuming almost at a sitting *The Great Man from the Provinces, Père Goriot, Cousin Pons, Cousine Bette,* it was so easy to identify myself with the young and seeking aspirants. . . . I knew his characters as well as he did, so magical was his skill. His grand and somewhat pompous philosophical deductions, his easy and offhand disposition of all manner of critical, social, political, historical, religious problems, the manner in which he assumed as by right of genius intimate and irrefutable knowledge of all subjects, fascinated and captured me as the true method of the seer and genius. Oh, to possess an insight such as this! To know and be a part of such a cosmos as Paris, to be able to go there, to work, to study, suffer, rise, and even end in defeat if need be, so fascinatingly alive were all the journeys of his puppets! What was Pittsburgh, what St. Louis, what Chicago?—and yet, in spite of myself, while I adored his Paris, still I was obtaining a new and more dramatic light on the world in which I found myself. . . .

"Coming out of the library this day, and day after day thereafter, the while I rendered as little

reportorial service as was consistent with even a show of effort, I marveled at the physical similarity of the two cities as I conceived it, at the chance for pictures here as well as there."

The "chances for pictures" in Pittsburgh became more and more real to him after he had talked with the "broad-shouldered, sad-faced labor reporter, by the name of Martyn."

"At first he appeared to be a little shy of me, but as time passed and I seemed to have established myself in the favor of the paper, he became more friendly. He was really a radical at heart, but did not dare let it be known here. Often of a morning he would spend as much as two hours with me, discussing the nature of coal-mining and steel-making, the difficulty of arranging wage conditions which would satisfy all the men and not cause friction; but in the main he commented on the shrewd and cunning way in which the bosses were more and more overreaching their employees, preying upon their prejudices by religious and political dodges, and at the same time misusing them shamefully through the company store, the short ton, the cost of mining materials, rent. At first, knowing nothing about the situation, I was inclined to doubt whether he was sound in these matters. Later, as I grew in personal knowledge, I thought he might be too conservative, so painful did many of the things seem which I saw with my own eyes and his aid."

Inspired by reading Balzac to do for American cities what Balzac had done for Paris, he became insatiably curious:

"I gathered all sorts of data as to the steel magnates—Carnegie, Phipps and Frick especially—their homes, their clubs, their local condescensions and superiorities. The people of Pittsburgh were looked upon as vassals by some of these, and their interviews on returning from the seashore or the mountains partook of the nature of a royal return."

Although he was attracted by the beauty of Paris through reading Balzac, he writes:

"Yet America and this city were fascinating enough to me. But because of the preponderant influence of foreign letters on American life it seemed that Paris and London must be so much better since every one wrote about them."

At that time Mr. Dreiser was achieving something of a reputation with his city editor by (of all things!) writing humorous sketches for the newspaper. But, "Mere humor, such as I could achieve when I chose, seemed always to require for its foundation the most trivial of incidents, whereas huge and massive conditions underlay tragedy and all the more forceful aspects of life."

From these paragraphs I have quoted, I think we have the genesis of Mr. Dreiser's career as a novelist. We have his inspiration in Balzac; we have his growing consciousness of the tremendous human drama unfolding all about him; we have his determination to explore the lives and thoughts and hearts of the people concerned with the great phase of American industrialism that was represented by the steel-manufacturing community of Pittsburgh; and we have him turning his back upon humor, for which he seems to have had a knack, and resolving to forswear all facetiousness, cleverness, and superficiality and get at the underlying motives of human life.

Mr. Dreiser in a conversation with me has corroborated my impression that in these paragraphs from *A Book About Myself* is to be found the key to the determining forces in his life as a novelist. It was in Pittsburgh, he said, that he first resolved to write novels, and it was in Pittsburgh that he first began mulling over the project of getting into a novel one of the great barons of American industrialism. When he decided to use Charles T. Yerkes, the Philadelphia and Chicago traction magnate, as a model for the

hero of this "Trilogy of Desire," of which only two volumes, *The Financier* and *The Titan,* have so far appeared, he went to Philadelphia, got access to the newspaper files and read everything he could find that had been written about Yerkes. He took no notes: to this day he uses no notes; and his massive autobiographical works, filled as they are with names of people he has not seen for twenty or thirty years and with hundreds of vividly recalled incidents, were written entirely from memory. His next step was to go to the city historian, who is in charge of a daily record of happenings in Philadelphia, going back half a century, and there read until "I knew old Philadelphia much better than the new." With the Philadelphia of Yerkes's boyhood and youth clear in his mind and with the steps in Yerkes's career in Philadelphia in his memory, he had the necessary documentation ready in his head and needed only to create a hero in his imagination and set him working out a career along the lines of which Mr. Dreiser was familiar. He had but to infuse the breath of art into the body of the materials he had. The result was *The Financier*. When he had similarly saturated himself in the history of Yerkes in

Chicago and again had familiarized himself with the Chicago of Yerkes's time, he had but to infuse the breath of art into the materials at hand and the result was *The Titan.*

The Financier was published in 1912, a year after *Jennie Gerhardt,* the novel that had followed *Sister Carrie* after an interval of eleven years; but it is obvious that *The Financier* not only was in the process of gestation before *Jennie Gerhardt* but that parts of it were even completed long before *Jennie Gerhardt. The Financier* is perhaps the least easy to read of Mr. Dreiser's novels. When he wrote it he had not yet a complete mastery of his materials. The theme, big as it was, was not too large for him; but he had not learned to distinguish between the relative importance of details; all of them seemed important to him. Like a too-conscientious historian he sometimes massed his facts so deeply that they strain the reader's capacity to assimilate them. As social history *The Financier* is one of the most important of Mr. Dreiser's books; as sheer story, it is perhaps his dullest—not because the story is not there and not because Cowperwood is not fully accounted for as an interesting figure,

but because both the story and Cowperwood carry the impedimenta of too much detail.

Also, in *The Financier,* Mr. Dreiser had not yet achieved that artistic detachment toward Cowperwood which he displays in *The Titan.* The resentment he had felt as a reporter against the steel barons of Pittsburgh for their treatment of their employees comes out in *The Financier.* In it he is still smarting against the injustice which allows the weak and foolish to become the prey of the strong and clever. Far from admiring Cowperwood, even for his energy, Mr. Dreiser cannot forbear to deliver a little philosophical homily when he closes the book which terminates Cowperwood's career in Philadelphia before he goes on to Chicago:

"If you had been a mystic or a soothsayer or a member of that mysterious world which divines by incantations, dreams, the mystic bowl, or the crystal sphere, you might have looked into their mysterious depths at this time and foreseen a world of happenings which concerned these two (Aileen and Cowperwood) who were now so fortunately placed. In the fumes of the witches' pot, or the depths of the radiant crystal, might have been revealed cities, cities, cities; a world of mansions, carriages, jewels, beauty; a vast metropolis out-

raged by the power of one man; a great State seething with indignation over a force it could not control; vast halls of priceless pictures; a palace unrivaled for its magnificence; a whole world reading with wonder, at times, of a given name.

"And sorrow, sorrow, sorrow.

"The three witches that hailed Macbeth upon the blasted heath might in turn have called to Cowperwood, 'Hail to thee, Frank Cowperwood, master of a great railway system! Hail to thee, Frank Cowperwood, builder of a priceless mansion! Hail to thee, Frank Cowperwood, patron of arts and possessor of endless riches! Thou shalt be famed hereafter.' But like the Weird Sisters, they would have lied, for in the glory was also the ashes of Dead Sea fruit—and understanding that could neither be inflamed by desire nor satisfied by luxury; a heart that was long since wearied by experience; a soul that was as bereft of illusion as a windless moon. And to Aileen, as to Macduff, they might have spoken a more pathetic promise, one that contained hope and failure. To have and not to have! All the seeming, and yet the sorrow of not having! Brilliant society that shone in a mirage, yet locked its doors; love that eluded as will-o'-the-wisp and died in the dark. 'Hail to thee, Frank Cowperwood, master and no master, prince of a world of dreams whose reality was sorrow!' So might the witches have called, the bowl have danced with figures, the fumes with vision, and it would have been true. What wise man might not have read from such a beginning, such an end?"

But in *The Titan* Mr. Dreiser profited by the mistakes he had made in *The Financier*. Practice had given him sureness of touch and had taught him what to avoid. It had given him self-confidence and gusto. The novel is epical in scope, dignity and solidity of form, and is warm with life. The rhythm of Chicago is in it—the Chicago that was sprawling across the prairie and the marsh lands on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan, shooting skyscrapers up along the paths which Indians had lately trod, building abattoirs to supply the world with pork and beef, controlling the world's grain market, building railroads and traction lines, drawing lads and girls from middle-western farms and immigrants from Southern Europe into its feverishly pulsating life, and either crushing them or giving them the means of wielding vast power. In *The Titan* we have a teeming cosmos as in Tolstoi's *War and Peace*. It is a novel peopled with a swarm of individual characters which play their little parts sometimes for only a few pages, and yet parts that are necessary to the whole effect. Financial power and political power were inseparable in the days Mr. Dreiser depicts, the one working through the other; and thus Mr. Dreiser

is at pains to show us, not only the means whereby political preference is controlled by money and whereby graft is used in acquiring such things as traction franchises from the municipal government, but also the human factors in these complex arrangements. Mr. Dreiser knows his "Bathhouse John" Coughlins and his "Hinky Dink" Kennas and he knows how they control the votes of the wards which determine the way an election will go; and how offices are thus filled with men under obligations of a corrupt and sinister sort. He knows his aldermen and his city attorneys, his municipal judges and his city traction experts. He brings them all into *The Titan,* without ever losing sight of Cowperwood or of his checkered, dramatic fight for power. Cowperwood's tremendous driving energy dominates the story just as the gross vitality of Taras Bulba dominates Gogol's epic of that name. The workings of the financial-political "system" is made clear to us; we feel its significance; we have deep intimations of its underlying close connection with the movement of life—with progress.

In Cowperwood we have the first man of action of heroic mold, definitely evolved out

of and connected with the American industrial scene, that had ever been conceived in American fiction. In him we have the Richard the Lion-hearted of American business. Cowperwood is the sort of man who expresses himself entirely in action; and activity is therefore the criterion by which he judges himself, just as the thinker assures himself that his work is not over and his life not done by his ability to meditate and evolve new concepts and images. The conquest of women inevitably forms a part of the program of a man like Cowperwood, for, animated by a desire for numerous and varied possessions and for an extension of power, the number of hearts he wins is to him a constant satisfaction and reassurance. Women are a symbol of his power, the visible evidence of success. To have ignored Cowperwood's relations with women would have been for Mr. Dreiser to paint only part of the man. Indeed, it would have been to falsify the portrait.

To gauge the greatness of *The Titan* in beauty, strength and power, it is only necessary to compare it to the other efforts made at the time (and since) to catch the significance of events and create a hero to dominate

them. H. B. Fuller's *Cliff-Dwellers* and *With the Procession* merely scratch the surface of the life of Chicago of that time; they indicate that Mr. Fuller was either unaware of, or unable to grasp, all that was going on about him. Frank Norris felt there was something epical about the Chicago Board of Trade, and he tried to get that something into *The Pit* and *The Octopus,* but both novels were far below Norris's own standards; neither of them got much beyond melodrama; both of them were without the overtones of *The Titan.* Coming down to contemporary times, a few others have tried to get into art the "feeling" of American industrial life—Garret Garrett in *The Driver,* based upon the life of E. H. Harriman, Newton Fuessle in *The Flail* and *Gold-Shod;* and, to some extent, Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt.* Mr. Garrett's story is merely good journalism and reads like a fairly adequate newspaper obituary; it has no depth or body. *The Flail* is a somewhat amateurish performance and *Gold-Shod* is introspective; in both of them the heroes are really artists instead of men of action, who are miscast as business men and are unhappy in their rôles. Mr. Lewis regards American business as a stupid farce in

Babbitt and turns upon it his satire and ridicule. In *The Bomb* Frank Harris deals only with a special aspect of industrialism as revealed in the Haymarket riots in Chicago. Bouck White's magnificent specimen of sustained irony, *The Book of Daniel Drew* shows how stocks are manipulated and small investors fleeced by unscrupulous Wall Street brokers; but Daniel Drew was a gambler, pure and simple, not an organizer, not even a financier in the usual meaning of that term. And Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* is a muck-raking novel.

Of all these novelists, with the possible exception of Garret Garrett, Mr. Dreiser is alone in treating the era of capitalism as an inevitable consequence of events and forces and not as an arbitrary arrangement effected by a few malign and sinister individuals. He is alone in seeing in industrial expansion the equivalent of war, and in seeing an analogy between the great manipulators of finance and the great strategist of war. He is alone in having achieved a perspective upon the great human drama involved in the war of finance, and thus in being able to treat it with the same detachment that epic poets have had toward heroic events of the remote

past. In other circumstances and other times, Mr. Dreiser knows that a man like Cowperwood would have had a career analogous to the one he portrays in *The Financier* and *The Titan;* it would be a career differing in superficialities, not in essentials.

In *Jennie Gerhardt,* as in *Sister Carrie,* Mr. Dreiser has a less complex story to tell, a simpler life to account for. It is an emotion-stirring tale of simple and troubled beauty, peopled with characters out of the soil of America. It is drenched with pity. Re-reading it for the purposes of this book, I was at a loss to understand how any one could be unaffected by the tragedy of it or fail to perceive how true the characters are to life. Until I recalled that when William Dean Howells was editing *The Atlantic* one of the women proof-readers refused to read proof on Bret Harte's *The Luck of Roaring Camp* I could not imagine what there is in the novel to which the most prudish moralist might object. When one of them, Stuart P. Sherman, declares in effect that no girl brought up as Jennie was brought up by strict and pious parents would act as Jennie acts, I can only suggest that Mr. Sherman

talk to some of his contemporaries who have not been shut up for years in a college library. When Jennie yields herself to Senator Brander, Mr. Sherman questions the reality of the episode on the grounds that Jennie was taught "right conduct in marriage and absolute innocence before that state as the essentials of Christian living; no salvation for the daughter who failed to keep her chastity unstained or for the parents who permitted her to fall." And again, having fallen, Jennie would not look forward to the birth of her child "without a murmur" and with "serene, unfaltering courage." I suggest that Mr. Sherman and all who believe as he does examine *A Study of Existing Conditions,* a document prepared by the Vice Commission of Chicago in 1911 under the supervision of such men as the then Dean Walter T. Sumner and the late Professor Charles R. Henderson. There are numerous case histories of prostitutes in this report. By reading these, Mr. Sherman will learn that a girl's losing her virtue is not incompatible with the strictest and most pious sort of home training; that the sacrifice of virtue "out of pure gratitude" is common enough (although the case is not quite as Mr. Sher-

man reports it; for Jennie was in love with Senator Brander); and that courage in awaiting the birth of a child is not an uncommon attribute in women even when the child is illegitimate. What is perhaps more important in this connection is that this report (and similar studies as well) would seem to indicate that the more pious and strict the religious training of a girl, the more likely is she to consider herself irretrievably lost after her first misadventure in love, and hence most ready to discard the ordinary inhibitions and restraints thereafter. Jennie's subjection to the "healthy, magnetic manufacturer" who, as Mr. Sherman puts it "claps his paw upon her," is entirely understandable and natural, and when "in a perfectly cold-blooded interview" he "proposes the terms on which he will set her up in New York as his mistress," there is nothing about the whole transaction that "shrieks with unreality." Mr. Sherman has entirely missed the moral beauty of the novel. He has failed entirely to see what Mr. Dreiser has done. He has failed to observe that in the Gerhardt family two things were paramount—piety and poverty. The Gerhardts were used to computing favors in

terms of money and, because money was a terrible and insistent problem to them, they were in the habit of overestimating the value of it. Had Jennie been brought up in comfortable and gentle surroundings, unused to the pressure of poverty, protected against the harsh contacts of the outside world, sheltered in refinement, the practical terms of the proposal might have outraged her sense of taste and delicacy. But reared as she was, having suffered the experiences she had suffered, the practical details of her lover's terms would be just the things to inspire in her trust and reliance. After her disastrous experience with Senator Brander the self-protective instinct alone would have made her cautious against the possibility of financial insecurity. Upon Jennie Mr. Dreiser has not, as Mr. Sherman asserts, "imposed his own naturalistic philosophy"; he has written a story that, so far as I can see, is psychologically without a flaw. The background, again, is that of the stirring, colorful life of American cities. Against none of the characters in *Jennie Gerhardt* has he pronounced judgment, for he has stated in *A Book About Myself* that he believes that people are neither altogether

good nor altogether bad, but a mixture of both, and that in the diversity of life lies its charm, its pathos, its beauty:

"Life will not be boxed in boxes. It will not be wrapped and tied up with strings and set aside on a shelf to await a particular religious or moral use. As yet we do not understand life, we do not know what it is, what the laws are that govern it. At best we see ourselves hobbling along, responding to this dream and that lust and unable to compel ourselves to gainsay the fires and appetites and desires of our bodies and minds. Some of these, in some of us, strangely enough (and purely accidentally, of that I am convinced) conform to the current needs or beliefs of a given society; and if we should be so fortunate as to find ourselves in that society, we are by reason of these ideals, favorites, statesmen, children of fortune, poets of the race. On the other hand, others of us who do not and cannot conform (who are left-over phases of ancient streams, perhaps, or portentous striæ of new forces coming into play) are looked upon as horrific, and to be stabilized, or standardized, and brought into the normal systole-diastole of things. Those of us endowed with these things in mind and blood are truly terrible to the mass—pariahs, failures, shams, disgraces. Yet life is no better than its worst elements, no worse than its best. Its perfections are changing temporalities, illusions of perfection that will be something very different to-morrow. Again I say, we do not know what life is—not nearly

enough to set forth a fixed code of any kind, religious or otherwise. But we do know that it sings and stings, that it has perfections, entrancements, shames—each according to his blood flux and its chemical character. Life is rich, gorgeous, an opium eater's dream of something paradisiacal."

Having portrayed a man of action in *The Financier* and *The Titan,* Mr. Dreiser chose for the hero of *The "Genius,"* an artist, a dreamer, incapable of accepting life on its own terms, an idealist of a sort, driven by an urge to create beauty. Whereas Frank Cowperwood is a ruthless egoist, capable of calculating the advantages to himself that lie in any given situation, aggressively self-confident and sure of himself, Eugene Witla is weak-willed, muddled, acutely sensitive, highly introspective. By using quotation marks around the word Genius in the title, Mr. Dreiser has indicated his own conviction of Witla's second-rateness. It is as if he had said, "Here is a man of talent who, if it were not for his essential weakness of character, would be a genius. What he lacks is purpose and the stamina to let nothing stand in the way of his achieving it. As it is, he allows people to make demands upon his energy, he allows sentiment to sway him this

way and that, and in the end he is a comparative failure." *The "Genius"* is a novel of prodigious length; but it is written with such intensity, its episodes are so vivid and dramatic, and the characters in it so alive, that I cannot hold with those critics who place it lowest in the scale of Mr. Dreiser's novels. It is massively detailed, but I, for one, should not care to lose any of those details. Mr. Mencken, for instance, balks at a scene which I found to be one of the most impressive in the book—the scene in which the haggard Witla, his brain a confusion of doubts and despair, goes to consult the Christian Science practitioner. The poignancy with which Witla's mental anguish is conveyed is heightened, I think, by the very completeness with which Mr. Dreiser describes the practitioner and the rooms she lives in. An unforced and unrhetorical irony is in this scene.

Cowperwood, in his dealings with women, is of the Casanova type, whereas Witla is of the Don Juan type. There is a wide difference between the two. The Don Juan is continually disillusioned by experience in love and yet continually imagines that each new glimpse of beauty embodied in a woman

gives the promise of the realization of the ideal. This pursuit becomes more important to Witla, for a time, than the work he has dreamed of doing, and when he discovers that he has neither won to his ideal in love nor achieved creative satisfaction in art, his sense of failure is overwhelming. If one seeks a moral lesson, I should think it would be hard to find a more important one than that in this book. Certain scenes in the novel stand out as triumphs of narration. I have in mind especially the holiday trip Witla took with the singer, that singer who so wounded his easily wounded vanity and who taught him something about the soul of an artist—had he had the nature to learn.

When Mr. Dreiser brought out *Twelve Men* those who had talked and written about the "sex obsession" present in Mr. Dreiser's work were confronted by a book in which there was scarcely any mention of sex love or of women. The reason was not that Mr. Dreiser had abandoned a former method of writing or had yielded to Puritanical dictates, but that in the lives of the twelve men he sought to portray in this book erotic desire was either unimportant or sublimated. When Mr. Dreiser wrote of Cowperwood and of

Witla, sex was prominent because sex occupied a determining part in their lives. He attempted conscientious, full length portraits; and for him to have shirked the importance passion played in their careers would have been to present false semblances of these men.

In *Twelve Men,* Mr. Dreiser was impelled by the same curiosity and conscientiousness which made his novels so distinctive. He was, of course, dealing with real people in *Twelve Men* and not with creations of his mind. But he presented them as he saw them, from every angle of observation of which he was capable. He tried to get at the bottom of their ideas and ideals, to see what motives prompted them to do this and that, to reveal their aspirations, their vanities, their attitude toward life and their manner of facing it. He found in twelve characters twelve amazingly divergent philosophies of life, all of which he presented without criticizing, blaming or moralizing. He neither "proposed nor imposed" and if he did not thoroughly expose it was because of a certain overwhelming human pity and sympathy that made it impossible for him to do so.

"Pity and sympathy"—those are words

which Mr. Dreiser's detractors would never think of applying to him, and those are the words which really characterize him as an artist. Nowhere is he gay-hearted or facetious, cynical, thoughtless or indifferent toward human life. He is haunted always by the tragic inexplicability of destiny, the aberrant cruelty of fate, the seeming indifference of the Infinite to the human struggle. Life's questions torture him, and no slight, irreverent gift of humor saves him from the pain of them. Seldom has there appeared in print a more moving tribute from one person to another than that in Mr. Dreiser's portrait of his brother, Paul Dresser, in *Twelve Men.* This elder brother was a massive compound of obesity, joviality, grossness, liberality, sentimentality, and generosity. He enjoyed for a time the fleeting adulation of the populace. He was a minstrel end-man, a jokesmith, and a writer of popular songs, who was once well known in the tinsel playworld of old Broadway, New York. There is affection in every line Mr. Dreiser writes about this brother, and yet nothing is thrown in to falsify or prettify the portrait. We see Paul, author of "On the Banks of the Wabash" and other sentimental ditties, as an affable, appealing

figure, blubbering profusely over his own compositions, the victim of his own generosity and compassion, something of an angel and something of a rake, nursing, in an atmosphere of facile success and flashy pleasures, a certain flicker of high purpose, and retaining against all the rebuffs of fate a fine unselfishness and beauty of character. It is a rounded and admirable portrait, tender, truthful, and human.

So, too, with the portrait of Harris Merton Lyon, "De Maupassant Junior." Here we have an abrupt, self-centered, censorious, highly talented youth who struggled with a fixed purpose, fought to impose his artistic ideals upon a sentiment-loving public, compromised, became a personage, lost his ideals in an excess of vanity, regained them, and died, just as he promised to become one of the important figures in American literature. Another one of the portraits in *Twelve Men* is that of Muldoon, the trainer who kept Roosevelt and others in good physical condition. Muldoon, whose name is disguised in the book, is a modern Spartan, whose rigid self-discipline enabled him to triumph over the inadequacy of his education and the low beginnings of his career, until with a mingled

envy and contempt he could dominate and rebuild in health the physical failures who came to him for health and who held positions of importance by reason of birth or of cleverness. Readers knowing Mr. Dreiser's work only by reputation will be amazed upon reading the portrait entitled "The Contented Man." It reduces the usual charge made against Mr. Dreiser to an absurdity. Here Mr. Dreiser has told about a modern saint, a strange being who actually succeeded in living the gospel of Jesus. This man found happiness and contentment in doing for others and taking nothing for himself. He was a believer in the goodness of mankind and in the clemency of God, a witness to miracles and a doer of righteousness. Mr. Dreiser believed in this man as thoroughly as he believed in any of the real or fictitious portraits he has drawn. He has toward this saint the same sympathy and understanding he has toward Carrie Meeber and Eugene Witla and Frank Cowperwood and Paul Dresser.

Aside from the finely wrought portraits in *Twelve Men,* Mr. Dreiser seems usually to require a larger canvas than the sketch or the short story to get his best effects. The stories in *Free* are distinctive only for that

truth-seeking sincerity and intensity which rarely desert him. But a surprising side of his genius was revealed when he produced *Plays of the Natural and Supernatural* and *The Hand of the Potter.* Three acts of the latter play are concerned with a terrible human tragedy, and are handled with superb restraint and remarkable technical skill. *The Hand of the Potter* has a ghastly theme—the crime of a pervert—but (with the exception of the last act) it is worked out in a masterly fashion. Mr. Dreiser's skill as a dramatic technician is evident in the suspense and outcome of the scene where the perverted youth approaches, hesitates, and sends from him the temptation in the form of the innocent little girl who brings him an apple; again in the scene where the family accepts slowly and in terror the evidence that the boy has committed a hideous crime; again in the courtroom where they attempt to protect him; and again in the scene where the boy writes the disjointed letter about himself. The tragedy is actually less concerned with the degenerate boy than with his poor, simple, harried parents. For the boy it is difficult to have any feeling whatever except horror at his plight, but for the family there

is an imponderable concern, an emotion-sharing sympathy. *The Hand of the Potter* loses in artistic effect and in intensity by the addition of the fourth act, wherein Mr. Dreiser deserts art for the pulpit and delivers a sermon. This tendency to moralize mars *A Traveler at Forty,* weakens some of the stories in *Free,* impedes the progress of the narrative in *The Financier,* and leads him away from the true path of his genius in *Hey, Rub-A-Dub-Dub.* Contrary to the current opinion, Mr. Dreiser does not undermine moral foundations. If anything, his moralizing tendency is his greatest drawback as an artist. It is difficult for him to resist a temptation to preach, to advise, to comment. He is a tragic optimist, trembling with profound pity over the dismal contortions of life, but ever hopeful that somehow, some time, man's burdens will be lightened and his afflictions healed. That consummation, he sometimes believes, may be hastened if every one took to heart the words of Voltaire, Robert Ingersoll, Ernst Haeckel, Krafft-Ebing, T. H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Havelock Ellis and Carl Snyder.

At other times, however, he is not so sure. "Actually," he writes, in *A Book About*

Myself, "(I sincerely believe this) it is not intended that man should ever be permitted to know anything. The temperaments of the powers to whom we pray are not magnanimous. Man is a slave, a tool. The fable of Prometheus and the divine fire has more of fact than poetry in it. At every turn of man's affairs he is arbitrarily and ruthlessly and mockingly confused."

Still:

"Man is a hopeful animal. He lives by the belief that some good must accrue to him or that his life is not worth the living. It is this faith then that in disaster or hours of all but unendurable misery causes him to turn in supplication to a higher power; and unless these prayers are in some measure answered, that faith can and will be destroyed, and life will and does become a shambles indeed. Hence, if one would balance peace against danger and death it becomes necessary for each to act as though the ideals of the world are in some sense real and that he in person is sponsor for them. . . . If you believe that hope is beautiful and that mercy is a virtue, if you would have the world more lovely and its inhabitants more kind, if you would have goodness triumph and sorrow laid aside, then you must be ready to make good to such supplicants and supplications as fall to you the virtues thus pathetically appealed to. You must act in the name of tenderness. If you cannot or will not,

by so much is the realization of human ideals, the possibility of living this life at all decently by any, made less."

There lives in Mr. Dreiser the remnants of the Catholic faith in which he was brought up, hard as he has tried to get away from it; and with that remnant there is also a mystical strain in his nature. It has led him to investigate psychic phenomena, to seek that which differentiates reality from dreams. It has led him on one occasion to write this significant paragraph in *A Book About Myself:*

"For a period of over fifteen years in my life, at the approach of every marked change—usually before I have passed from an old set of surroundings to a new—I have met a certain smug, kindly little Jew, always the same Jew, who has greeted me most warmly, held my hand affectionately for a few moments, and wished me well. I have never known him any more intimately than that. Our friendship began at a sanatorium, at a time when I was quite ill. Thereafter my life changed and I was much better. Since then, as I say, always at the critical moment, he has never failed. I have met him in New York, Chicago, the South, in trains, on shipboard. It is always the same. Only the other day, after an absence of three years, I saw him again. I am not theorizing; I am stating facts. I have a feeling, at times, as I say, that life is nothing but

a repetition of very old circumstances, and that we are practically immortal, only not very conscious of it."

Half incredulous, I once asked Mr. Dreiser if he really believed what he had written in that paragraph, and he answered with all seriousness and frankness that he not only believed it, but that it had actually happened to him, that he had "known it for a fact."

The truth, then, is that he has that chaos in him which gives birth to dancing stars. He is one of the authentic geniuses American literature has produced.

BIOGRAPHICAL

THE most striking thing about the purely autobiographical books of Theodore Dreiser is the singular uneventfulness of Mr. Dreiser's youth. Nothing in particular happened to him. He had his sweethearts; but what youth has not, and with more rapid frequency, greater moonshine, happier novelty and more signal success than had Mr. Dreiser? During all his years as a newspaper reporter, in Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and New York, he seems to have had but one adventure, to have been witness to or assigned to cover but one catastrophe and that quite by accident. You have but to remember that he was a reporter in Chicago during the wide-open days following the World's Fair, in Pittsburgh when that city was just reaching its apotheosis as a community of steel and poverty, in New York when Richard Harding Davis, David Graham Phillips, Arthur Brisbane and Samuel Hopkins Adams were on the rise as newspaper men, to wonder what Mr. Dreiser was doing

when a great deal of interesting hell was popping all about him.

There is an unconscious irony in these revelations. Or perhaps the irony is conscious. There was never a youth who started out in life with a more grandiose equipment of romantic illusions; and there was never a romantic youth who encountered fewer dragons to slay, fewer maidens to rescue and fewer varlets to put in their place than Mr. Dreiser.

He had almost no fun at all. He held hands here and there; he missed, he tells us, one or two opportunities; having his breakfast in a diner once he had the momentary satisfaction of thinking himself an aristocrat when a yokel on the platform of a bleak station gazed upon him in saucer-eyed envy and admiration; he bought a Stetson hat broad-brimmed enough for Buffalo Bill and a military coat long enough to fit the late Grand Duke Michael Michaelovitch, to go courting in; he played up to his relatives once far too effectively as a man of mark, position and salary and had to spend more than he could afford; Arthur Brisbane was once kind to him; and he chaperoned a delegation of school teachers on a visit to the World's

Fair. But the unexpected, serio-comic, ludicrous-pathetic, Rabelaisian escapades and adventures the cavalier reporter is usually heir to, Mr. Dreiser never had. His brother, Paul Dresser, had them, and he was not a newspaper man.

One gets an impression of Theodore as a moony, much-troubled, poetic, shy and diffident young man stumbling dreamily, vaguely through the murky streets of Chicago and Pittsburgh, transferring the self-pity of his poverty into an easy and comforting pity for the people of the slums, challenging the God of his pious German Catholic father to answer for the miseries of the world and his own, finding a momentary solace in the flattery of a smile or a kiss, catching a fleeting glimpse of beauty in a sunset, the shadows of a city street, the foliage of a city park, the trim body of a pretty girl, or of a campanile against a winter sky. But his adventures were those of the spirit, not of the flesh.

That is why it was on the calendar that Mr. Dreiser should become a novelist and not a great newspaperman, as it was his first ambition to be. All the factors of his early life, which may be discovered in the frank and

beautiful pages of *A Hoosier Holiday, A Traveler at Forty,* and the chapter on his brother Paul in *Twelve Men,* tended to mold him into a man of dramatic imagination, romantically inclined. And life is not dramatic; only art is that. Life is melodramatic, with elements of low comedy relief; and to be a good journalist, a good reporter, one must recognize this truth. Mr. Dreiser was not a good reporter; he might have made a fair to middling editorial writer or a Sunday feature man, for he thought in dramatic terms, with wistful overtones of criticism and of wonder; but he had not the equipment to see events in a cynical, cool light as a spectacle, amusing, pathetic, ephemeral—as ephemeral as last year's great murder mystery. He had much, far too much, soul.

Theodore was, curiously or significantly enough, the Parsifal, the Galahad of his family. It was upon him that the family teaching and training had settled most definitely. To this day he drinks rarely and does not smoke, and his language is free from profanity or obscenity. He was and is tender, affectionate, still a little credulous and sentimental. His biography is an analogue of the spirit of his time. He went, like

a boy hero out of a Horatio Alger, Jr., novel, to Chicago to seek his fortune. His ambitions, as he states them, were definitely material. He wanted to cut a figure in the world. He wanted rubber-tired carriages and fur coats and pretty women in beautiful gowns to admire and love him. There settled upon him the spell of what the psychologists, since the time of the début of Jules de Gaultier, have called Bovarysm; he eagerly sought to be something quite other than what he was. He was (or rather thought himself to be, for he is really handsome) an ugly, ungainly and unattractive man; and so he wanted women to fall for him in windrows. No one was more surprised than he when, in a measure, they did. A smile swelled his chest, a kiss vastly reassured him, a conquest set him up, made him proud. Utterly without vanity, greed or aggressiveness, indeed a humble, grateful compound of sentimentalism and idealism, it is amusing to consider the gossip and criticism which have made of him an ogre, a Machiavelli and a terrible Don Juan. It was after more than a year of ardent courtship that "I reached a place where I could hold her hand, put my arms about her, kiss her, but never could I induce

her to sit upon my lap. That was reserved for a much later date."

In his other contacts with life he was no less ill at ease and without assurance. The office boys in the outer corridor of the editorial rooms of "The World" treated him so disrespectfully that he has not to this day got over it. He pays tribute to their bad manners to the extent of five pages in *A Book About Myself*. He was buffeted at every turn of life by reality; he was sensitive with the sensitivity of an artist; by instinct tolerant, kind, gentle, self-effacing, but no less giving the full meed of his admiration to the dashing aggressive, successful figures of American life. A saving sense, not of humor, but of intelligence, made him see these men in their proper perspective; it was this sense plus the endowment of his romantic imagination which enabled him to create Frank Cowperwood and Eugene Witla, which stand as authentic and carefully realized figures in American society during its great epoch of industrial democracy. He had, it appears, during the years recorded in his autobiography but two or three particular enthusiasms in the field of fiction—Dickens, Hugo and Balzac. It was Balzac

whom he wished most to emulate; and it was not, interestingly enough, out of worship of Balzac as an artist. It was frankly because he wanted to know as much of American high life as Balzac appeared to know and to mingle in it. He tells us he loved and suffered and lived with Balzac's heroes and heroines, that they were to him as real as any people he knew. It was such a world that he lived in. No wonder he failed as a newspaper man, for in newspaper reporting there is little room for imagination—life is much too stridently colored for that—and became a novelist. And it is little wonder that he has begun to write his reminiscences out of a failure fully to have his say in fiction, and that he has already given us one volume of tenderness and truth, humbly and sincerely told, the poignantly interesting history of a not unusual life, which in its very commonplaceness may serve as a representative record of the barrenness of the average life in elements of adventure and ecstasy.

. . . . .

It must be a cause for pain and chagrin to Mr. Dreiser's detractors as a novelist, who urge against him the single score of immorality, to read such books as *A Hoosier*

Holiday, A Traveler at Forty and *A Book About Myself.* The self-revelation in these books is frank and sincere. Mr. Dreiser has the conspicuous virtue of all great confessors; he does not hide the truth even when it makes him ridiculous. For certainly he is in turn pathetic and lovable, sublime and ludicrous. He is, like the George Moore of *Hail and Farewell,* much and often a booby; he is, like the St. Augustine of the *Confessions* much and often a noodle; he is, like Rousseau, much and often an ass; he is, like Casanova, much and often a vain and comical boaster; he is, like Bunyan and Dickens, in frequent bad taste; but he is forever and always frank, honest and sincere. He blurts it all out. "Here I am," says he, "in all my nakedness. I have tried hard, desperately hard, to find some design, some symmetry, some meaning to life. I have thought as much as it is in my capacity to think; I have felt as much as it is in my capacity to feel; I have experimented, struggled, fought, argued, to the limit of my capabilities that those who come after me may know something more of life than I. I have learned little, damned little. My impressions are as confused and disarranged as the life I have seen and experi-

enced. I have a theory, from some scientist or philosopher with whom I could agree, about chemical reactions, laws of attractions and repulsions, the mating force, the instability of dogma, the anachronism of monogamy and all that. I may be wrong. But I am telling you, frankly, fully, sincerely, what my life has been; what I have thought and experienced. Make what you can of it. I am compelled to write it out of the same inner necessity that dictated *Sister Carrie* and *The Titan.* If it is valuable to humanity, I am glad. If it is not, well and good; I have had my say."

And what is that life and what has Dreiser had to say? In the small industrial town of Terre Haute, Indiana, Theodore Dreiser was born on August 27, 1871, of poverty-stricken, pious, Catholic parents of German descent. He was the twelfth child in a family of thirteen children. His father owned a small woolen mill, which burned down and left the family penniless. There were far too many children: they had early to shift for themselves without adequate training and education; there were the bickerings and family quarrels incident to a precarious domestic economic struggle. Of his father he writes:

"I never knew a narrower, more hidebound religionist, nor one more tender and loving in his narrow way. He was a crank, a tenth rate Saint Simon or Francis of Assisi, and yet a charming person if it had been possible to get his mind off the subject of religion for more than three seconds at a time. He worked, ate, prayed, slept and dreamed religion. With no other thought than the sanctity and glory and joy of the Catholic Church, he was constantly attempting to drive a decidedly recalcitrant family into a similar point of view."

And of his mother, Dreiser has this to say:

"I certainly had one of the most perfect mothers ever a man had. . . . An open, uneducated, wondering, dreamy mind, none of the customary, conscious principles with which so many conventional souls are afflicted. A happy, hopeful, animal mother, with a desire to live, and not much constructive ability wherewith to make real her dreams. A pagan mother taken over into the Catholic Church at marriage, because she loved a Catholic and would follow her love anywhere. A great poet mother, because she loved fables and fairies and half believed in them, and once saw the Virgin Mary standing in our garden, blue robes, crown and all, and was sure it was she! She loved the trees and flowers and the clouds and the sound of the wind, and was wont to cry over tales of poverty almost as readily as over poverty itself, and to laugh over the mannikin fol de rols of all too responsive souls."

In the illuminating bits of biography which are scattered through one of his best books, *A Hoosier Holiday,* Dreiser tells us that he and his two younger brothers picked up coal from the railroad tracks, because there was no money for fuel, and that his mother once tried to keep the family intact by taking in boarders. The older children, however, struck out for themselves, with more or less success. Among the children there were definite evidences of a heritage of talent, even of genius. Paul was a musician, self-trained and instinctive, an amiable and talented man, generous, sentimental, childlike, who achieved considerable eminence as a song writer and variety entertainer on Broadway during the 'Nineties, and who is still remembered as the author of "On the Banks of the Wabash." There was another brother who had the sensitive equipment of a poet and for whom life proved to be too great a strain: he flared brilliantly for a moment and died abjectly in a South Clark Street dive in Chicago. The sisters married —one of them, he tells us, was killed by a train in Chicago in 1897.

When their poverty was at its lowest, Dreiser's mother took the three youngest children, including Theodore, first to a friend

in Vincennes for a few weeks, thence to Sullivan for two years, later to the home of his then prosperous brother, Paul, in Evansville, Indiana, and later to Warsaw. Theodore's schooling began in the parochial schools of Terre Haute, continued in the public schools of Warsaw, and ended with a short experience at the University of Indiana. As a boy in Warsaw he had "found Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Hawthorne, Fielding, Defoe, and a score of others and had been reading, reading, reading swiftly and with enjoyment. Cooper, Irving, and Lew Wallace (*Ben Hur* at least) were a part of my mental pabulum. From the public library I drew Dryden, Pope, Shakespeare, Herrick and a dozen other English and American poets." Later we find him reading Balzac but more significant of all, perhaps, Spencer, Huxley, and Tyndall, all of whom, together with Carl Snyder and his curious work of mechanistic philosophy, *The World Machine,* exercised a profound influence upon his way of thinking:

"At this time I had the fortune to discover Huxley and Tyndall and Herbert Spencer, whose introductory volume to his *Synthetic Philosophy* (*First Principles*) quite blew me, intellectually, to bits. Hitherto, until I had read Huxley, I had some lin-

gering filaments of Catholicism trailing about me, faith in the existence of Christ, the soundness of his moral and sociologic deductions, the brotherhood of man. But on reading *Science and Hebrew Tradition* and *Science and Christian Tradition,* and finding both the Old and New Testaments to be not compendiums of revealed truth but mere records of religious experiences, and very erroneous ones at that, and then taking up *First Principles* and discovering that all I deemed substantial—man's place in nature, his importance in the universe, this too, too solid earth, man's very identity save as an infinitesimal speck of energy, or a 'suspended equation' drawn or blown here and there by larger forces in which he moved quite unconsciously as an atom —all questioned and dissolved into other and less understandable things, I was completely thrown down in my conceptions or non-conceptions of life.

"Up to this time there had been in me a blazing and unchecked desire to get on and the feeling that in doing so we did get somewhere; now in its place was the definite conviction that spiritually one got nowhere, that there was no hereafter, that one lived and had his being because one had to and that it was of no importance. Of one's ideals, struggles, deprivations, sorrows and joys, it could only be said that they were chemic compulsions, something which for some inexplicable but unimportant reason responded to and resulted from the hope of pleasure and the fear of pain. Man was a mechanism, undevised and uncreated, and a badly and carelessly driven one at that.

"I fear that I cannot make you feel how these things came upon me in the course of a few weeks' reading and left me numb, my gravest fears as to the unsolvable disorder and brutality of life eternally verified. I felt as low and hopeless at times as a beggar of the streets. There was of course this other matter of necessity, internal chemical compulsion, to which I had to respond whether I would or no. I was daily facing a round of duties which now more than ever verified all that I had suspected and that these books proved. With a gloomy eye I began to watch how the chemical—and their children, the mechanical—forces operated through man and outside him, and this under my very eyes. Suicides seemed sadder since there was no care for them; failures the same. One of those periodic scandals breaking out in connection with the care of prisoners in some local or state jail, I saw how self-interest, the hope of pleasure or the fear of pain caused jailers or wardens or a sheriff to graft on prisoners, feed them rotten meat, torture them into silence and submission, and then, politics interfering (the hope of pleasure again and the fear of pain on the part of some), the whole thing hushed up, no least measure of the sickening truth breaking out in the subservient papers. Life could or would do nothing for those whom it so shamefully abused."

If we read carefully the sentence, "Up to this time there had been in me a blazing and unchecked desire to get on and the feeling

that in doing so we did get somewhere," I think we have the key to Mr. Dreiser's spiritual regeneration, his conversion to art against the ways of materialism. The light that came to him through Spencer and Huxley is not unlike the phenomenon that occurred on the road to Damascus, and if Mr. Dreiser's conception of the Truth that came to him was colored by his personality, so also was Paul's. Mr. Dreiser has made it plain in his autobiographical works that up to the time of his encounter with the works of Spencer and Huxley his aims in life were definitely materialistic. Born and reared in poverty, struggling desperately *to get on* as a newspaper man, looking on with a certain envy at all the superficial evidences of the happiness to be found in wealth and position, he, too, wanted to make money, enjoy the display of possessions, achieve the prevailing American idea of success. It was probably because he had experienced the ambitions and desires that animate men like Cowperwood that he could make their inner experience ring so authentic to us. But, once Spencer and Huxley had caused him to stop in this definite drive toward a wholly materialistic goal and ask himself what it was all about,

then was the tinder lighted which glows through his work. Then it was, no doubt, that he set his feet definitely on the path of writing what his heart and head told him about life. Since that time nothing has caused him to deviate from this path, neither calumny nor criticism, neither poverty nor indifference. Among authors of the present day he is one of the very few who have never troubled themselves to answer critics, never bothered to correct false impressions about themselves, never sought reprisals against those who have maligned and misrepresented them. He has gone on, living obscurely, keeping out of the factional fights of the day, away from the gatherings of writers. The singleness of his purpose is amazing. He has trod on like a Golem with hundreds of critical Lilliputians tugging at his legs, throwing stale eggs and other missiles at him, barking themselves hoarse in denunciation of him. Praise affects him equally indifferently. He writes, if any one ever wrote, out of an inner necessity.

CRITICAL NOTE

THE definitive study of the life and works of Theodore Dreiser is yet to be written. It will, perforce, be a study of considerable proportions: one volume in large octavo, running to about 200,000 words would be about the minimum of space the conscientious critical biographer could allow himself in which to interpret Dreiser in relation to the American scene, trace his growth and development, and analyze his completed works individually and as a whole. It will be a work involving long and laborious preparation in the economic history of America following the Civil War, and in the study of the tendencies in American literature just previous to and at the time of Dreiser's début as a novelist. It will mean an acquired familiarity with many books out of print and out of mind which are difficult to procure. Such a book might be suggested as a thesis for a master's or a doctor's degree to some intelligent, enthusiastic, conscientious young student with critical aspirations, were it not

that college deans as a rule prefer theses that no one but the author and the college printer ever reads—about subjects so dead that they communicate chill death to the liveliest intelligence that plays over them.

Meanwhile, even the critical writings in direct reference to Dreiser are few in number. The best of these are to be found in *A Book of Prefaces* by H. L. Mencken; *Contemporary American Novelists,* by Carl Van Doren; *Contemporary Portraits* by Frank Harris; and *Some Contemporary Americans* by Percy H. Boynton. Mencken's study is the best of these; it is remarkably fine in its treatment of Dreiser and Dreiser's work in the round. Mencken's impression of Dreiser is sound, comprehensive and illuminating; and it is particularly admirable in that it was the first notable essay to appear which showed an American critic to be aware of Dreiser's significance. It is weak only in detail, in specific analysis. So necessary do I think a knowledge of Mencken's essay on Dreiser to the student of Dreiser that, in so far as possible, I have avoided duplicating some important historical testimony Mencken has adduced concerning Dreiser's career.

Van Doren's essay is wise and compre-

hending if rather sketchy. Its value is somewhat extrinsic for these two reasons: Van Doren, as an associate in the department of English at Columbia University, a Doctor of Philosophy, managing editor of the *Cambridge History of American Literature,* and the author and editor of several learned works, was the first critic to bring Dreiser into academic circles and introduce him as a conscientious artist with verifiable genius and not the ogre that terrified old gentlemen had heard he was. The other extrinsic reason for the value of Van Doren's essay is that it is in a book on contemporary American literature which future students of American letters cannot well do without, so unerring is Van Doren in detecting literary values in contemporaneous writing and so thorough and exact is his knowledge of the work he discusses. His essay on Hamlin Garland, for instance, should be read twice—once for what it tells about Garland and his work, and next for what it tells about the forces that corrupted the artist who wrote *Main Traveled Roads.* Two pages of this essay (pages 43 and 44, to be exact) are to me more illuminating than Van Wyck Brooks's several fine, serious, laborious attempts to

account for the tragedy of the artist in industrial America.

Professor Boynton's essay on Dreiser, although it reads like a hurried clambering aboard the bandwagon (it followed Van Doren's essay by several months and constituted on its appearance a right-about-face on the professor's part; for hitherto he had been following Stuart P. Sherman on the soapbox against all of the American literature that was then in being), is meaty, intelligent, well-written, going straight to the core of the truth about the Dreiser legend and giving the essence of Dreiser's art and of the point of view underlying it. It reads as if Professor Boynton had suddenly decided it might not be a bad idea to read some of the books of the men he had been denouncing, and, once having read them, had discovered he had been running with the wrong pack of hounds. He lays the fallacy that Dreiser's prose is always uncouth and the legend that Dreiser is a perverter of morals. When he writes, "To any one who has had Dreiser held up to him as a kind of moral ghoul, obsessed with animalism, the reading of *Twelve Men* will come as a series of surprises," one feels that it is Professor Boynton who had had Dreiser

so held up to him and that a reading of Dreiser had given *him* some surprises. He concludes that "Dreiser is doing a work as massive and hard-wrought as the statues of Rodin."

Stuart P. Sherman's essay on Dreiser in *On Contemporary Literature* may be read as a crystallization of the sort of critical yelping that pursued Dreiser down to 1922 and is still echoed here and there in the weekly newspapers of the remote provinces, when nice old maids and shut-ins seek expression by "reviewing" books from the public library. Sherman sets up a false premise in regard to Dreiser and argues from that false premise by a most astonishing misrepresentation of the facts. It is a moral harangue in which the slight bit of evidence introduced in support is as badly doctored as the data in a prosecutor's address to the jury in a sensational murder trial, and is conceived to make the same sort of emotional appeal. And just as many prosecuting attorneys are elected to judicial benches on the number of hangings they have brought about, irrespective of guilt or innocence, so was Mr. Sherman elevated to the critical bench on the strength of hanging in effigy Dreiser, George Moore, Samuel

Butler, H. L. Mencken, Anatole France, Alfred Austin, H. G. Wells, and Mark Twain.

Impressions of Dreiser as a person may be gleaned from Frank Harris's *Contemporary Portraits;* Ernest Boyd's *Portraits, Real and Imaginary;* and *The Spotlight,* edited by John Farrar.

The best summing up of his artistic aims, his attitude toward life, and his personal philosophy is to be found in Mr. Dreiser's *Life, Art and America,* originally published in "The Seven Arts" magazine and reprinted in *Hey, Rub-A-Dub-Dub.* It is too long for quotation here, and to quote extracts from it would be to over-emphasize certain features of it and thereby falsify the context. But in it, Mr. Dreiser makes his most impressive attack upon the materialistic aspect of American civilization, an aspect which, as he points out, wears a sinister mask of hypocritical idealism. It is in this essay that the student of Mr. Dreiser will find the philosophy which nourished such works as *The Financier* and *The Titan.* . . .

Illuminating references to Dreiser may be found in *Letters and Leadership* by Van Wyck Brooks and *The Collected Papers* of Randolph Bourne.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1900—Sister Carrie.
1911—Jennie Gerhardt.
1912—The Financier.
1913—A Traveler at Forty.
1914—The Titan.
1915—The "Genius."
1916—Plays of the Natural and Supernatural.
1918—Free and Other Stories.
1918—The Hand of the Potter.
1919—Twelve Men.
1920—Hey, Rub-a-Dub-Dub.
1922—A Book About Myself.
1923—The Color of a Great City.

53209

53209

PS
3507 Rascoe, Burton.
R55 Theodore Dreiser.
Z8
1926
DATE DUE

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT TYLER
PS3507.R55 Z8 1926
Theodore Dreiser /
0 00 01 0021961 7